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The Rural School

Discussion by Mrs E. H. Harriman at the Fiftieth University Convocation, October 23, 1914

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THE RURAL SCHOOL

It is largely due to Doctor Finley that I am here today. He knows that I am an amateur, altogether a novice, on the question of education, but he also knows that my heart is in the rural school question, and that I am struggling with it alone in Orange county.

I am very glad to come here today, although my ideas and experiences have come to me from associations with others, who are better able to teach me than I am to teach them; so it is all Doctor Finley's fault, but I am glad to assist.

It has been my habit all along to do things rather than to talk about them. It seems to me that everybody has to do things which they are not fitted for, that are not congenial, but I am glad to tell you about some things in Orange county which will doubtless seem uninteresting after Mr Quick has drawn his pictures of rural schools and their aims. What I shall give you is the result of my three years' experience.

I shall begin by telling you that I took a permanent stand last year and committed myself to rural schools because when that wonderful fund was raised in New York for the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, many appeals were, of course, made to me, and to them all I made one answer, that I could not subscribe to a fund that put a premium on the attractions of New York City for the country men and maidens, because I had become convinced, having been interested in the development of rural conditions and young people, that honorable careers and professions were possible in rural districts, taking for their foundations the rural home — I go back a little bit farther, being a woman — I go back to the home, and after that the school. But the rural school being the subject of discussion today, I shall confine myself to that.

You all perhaps know, or perhaps you do not know, that the Harriman estate is only about twenty miles back from Newburgh,

fifteen miles from West Point, in the Ramapo mountains, and the Ramapo mountains are a continuation of the Appalachian range of which Mr Quick has told you and, strange to say, the same conditions prevail in the Ramapo mountains to a great extent — the same flowers and birds and the same rocks and even the same animals, and also the same population.

Mr Harriman's first efforts when we went to Arden were to get all the mountain population down from the mountains into the villages where they could be cared for and where they could work under better conditions. So I have now under my care on the Harriman estate three different types of rural schools, and I have learned a great deal from studying their different characters, but in them I find three important factors, but quite the same. These are the mental and physical condition of the children, the need for special training for teachers of rural schools, and the rearrangement of the courses of study and the introduction of manual training and vocational instruction.

The first school of which I shall speak is the high school in the village of Harriman. It is called the union free school and is made up of high school courses and preliminary grades. The curriculum required of the pupils is bewildering to an old and educated mind, and the demands upon the two teachers are overwhelming. I do not know whether I need even to read the courses — I fancy you are rather familiar with that kind of a school — but it made my hair quite gray to learn that English first and second, Latin first and second, German first and second, ancient history, drawing, zoology, botany, physiology, algebra and geometry were all taught to seventeen pupils by two teachers. How they lived through it, I do not know.

There has been a movement in the right direction because a physical examination is being made. The trouble is that it is not followed up. I find in America we are wonderful in making laws but we do not carry them out. If we spent a little more of our time trying to carry out a few good laws, I think perhaps we would be more successful.

Another school about five miles from that, still in Arden, is the district school of the village of Arden, and is composed principally of lower grades. There conditions are more normal, both as to pupils and teachers, and we have introduced sewing and carpentry work and some cooking lessons among these children, but it has all been by private effort. In fact, the first time I tried to introduce cooking lessons the girls said they did not care about it, but fortunately the boys took to it kindly, which induced the girls to become interested, so we may be turning out some good chefs from our village.

But the third school is the one to which I want particularly to draw your attention, as it covers several problems. It is situated at the Sterling mines, which is also our property, consisting of about 20,000 acres of very beautiful country, altogether given over to mining at present. This school is composed of about fifty children, native and foreign born, and also native-born mountaineer children. In this school we find combined all the questions that cover our immigrant and mountain children, of which we have quite a number, and not all confined to Virginia. One need not go to Virginia to find very many poor whites, I am sorry to say.

Following the program which I have already given you, that the condition of the school and the teachers and the curriculum should be the foundations of our rural schools, I have had the Binet test made in that school. The Binet test is used extensively on the arrival of immigrants, to find out whether or not those immigrants are eligible for citizenship here. My attention was brought to it a few years ago and I thought it would be a wonderful way of testing the children of the foreign-born, and also of our mountaineer children who are of lower grade. So I started at the Sterling mine school, and as the result is rather comprehensive I would like to have Doctor Finley look it over, and he probably will be rather shocked to find that among the fifty children, there was only one normal and one abnormal — rather brighter than usual — and the others were in various degrees of backwardness, and a few were defectives.

These are the children to be taught, and imagine giving them a curriculum such as I have read! I turned for help to the Education Department that brought me here today, and from Doctor Finegan I procured permission to change the course of study and sent the under teacher (we have two teachers at this school) first to Columbia where they have a summer course for training and teaching backward children, and then the following year I sent the teacher to the Vineland training school, where the course is even more efficient because there they have the care of backward children. With this teacher trained in teaching backward children, and with Doctor Finegan's permission to alter the curriculum, this is the third year we have been working.

The test of the children's condition is taken each year, and although the school changes a little there are enough of the original pupils to show the improvement that has been made by this change of teachers and course of study. I am very much encouraged because I find that Providence has given everybody a chance to be better, to develop and improve, but the great question is how to do it, so I have taken up this course to determine, first of all, what the child is capable of doing, and then with all care and patience to give that child a chance to develop along that line, and in that way the school is showing a wonderful improvement. I am tremendously gratified by my small efforts in this direction.

Wishing to compare the Sterling mine school with other district schools in the neighborhood, the Ramapo mountains and the outskirts, I have had seven schools tested, and find that among the hills and the barren regions the children are invariably of a lower type of intelligence and physique than where the land is more fertile, but where the farms are being developed and families are more prosperous, there the mental and physical conditions are better. I have brought these statements with me and will be glad to leave them here as they may be of some use in a statistical way.

But it all goes to prove, in my mind, that the rural home and the rural school are capable of great success; that there is no

reason why, with favorable conditions, with better teachers, the children should not develop into young men and women who will be a credit to the country and who will raise the standard of rural life.

I have no great pictures to paint, because my work is in the embryo stage, and I think it would be better to begin at the foundation and work up. While I rejoice in the picture that Mr Quick drew, that is what we shall try to live up to, and with favorable conditions, and with all working together, because our country covers the most fertile and the most barren country and we can not neglect the hill country for the sake of the valley country, we shall accomplish much. But we have all these different types to work with. I have always been told that we must raise our lowest before we can reach our highest and I hope that these conditions in schools along the border of the Hudson river may be improved, through Doctor Finley's efforts.

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